# Peter in Rome

Every year millions of Christian pilgrims converge on the Vatican, the heart of Catholic Christendom, and its vast basilica bearing the apostle Peter's name. The church, visitors are told, marks the site of Peter's tomb. According to long-standing tradition, Peter was martyred in Rome during Emperor Nero's persecutions of the Christians in the mid-60s C.E. But while Peter, the "rock" on which Jesus founded his church, will forever be linked with Rome, and Rome with Peter, we have no clues as to how or when he came there, and the evidence, both archaeological and textual, of his time in Rome is thin—dating back to the second century C.E. but no earlier.

The Book of Acts tells us Peter left Jerusalem in about 43 C.E., after Herod Agrippa I put him in jail and an angel helped him escape (*Acts 12:3–19*). Our first clue as to where Peter went comes from Paul, who mentions in his Letter to

the Galatians (*2:11–21*) that Peter traveled to Antioch. Paul does not describe Peter's going to Rome, however, and when Paul writes to the church in Rome in about 57/58 C.E. and greets a long list of members, Peter's name is not among them.

Clement, the late-first-century C.E. leader of the Roman church, is the first to write of Peter's suffering and martyrdom,[1] but he gives no indication that Peter worked or died in Rome (although later tradition claims that Clement was ordained bishop by Peter himself). Bishop Ignatius of Antioch, sent to Rome and martyred sometime between 110 and 130 C.E., also fails to mention Peter as leader (bishop) of the church in Rome.[2]

Around 100 C.E., the New Testament First Letter of Peter locates Peter in Rome —but rather cryptically. That is, it describes the sender of the letter as "the elect one in Babylon"—a first-century code word for Rome, the oppressive empire of the day (*1 Peter 5:12–13*). But although this letter bears Peter's name, it is not believed to have been written by him. Further, the letter is addressed to Christians in provinces of Roman Asia Minor, confirming Paul's account of Peter's activities farther east.

By the late second century, however, Peter is regularly paired with Paul as cofounder of the church in Rome. The inspiration for this tradition apparently comes from the Book of Acts, which neatly divides the account of how the gospel spread from Jerusalem (the setting of *Acts 1*) to Rome (the setting of the final chapter, *Acts 28*) into a Peter section (*Acts 1–12*) followed by a Paul section (*Acts 13–28*). In the late second century C.E., the church father Irenaeus (c. 185 C.E.) described the church of Rome as "the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul."[3] The presbyter (church elder) Gaius mentions two monuments in Rome dedicated to these "founders of the church." According to Gaius, Peter's monument is at the Vatican, Paul's on the Ostian Way (in southern Rome, where the church of Saint Paul Outside the Walls now stands).[4] Gaius's term for monument—*tropaion*, meaning "trophy"—can refer to a tomb or to a memorial erected at the site of martyrdom.[5] Gaius is thus the earliest writer to locate Peter's martyrdom in Rome.

In the early third century, the Christian writer Tertullian assumes that readers know Peter was crucified and Paul executed (probably beheaded) during the Roman emperor Nero's persecutions.[6] Tertullian interprets Peter's death as the fulfillment of *John 21:18–19*, in which Jesus predicts: "When you [Peter] grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around

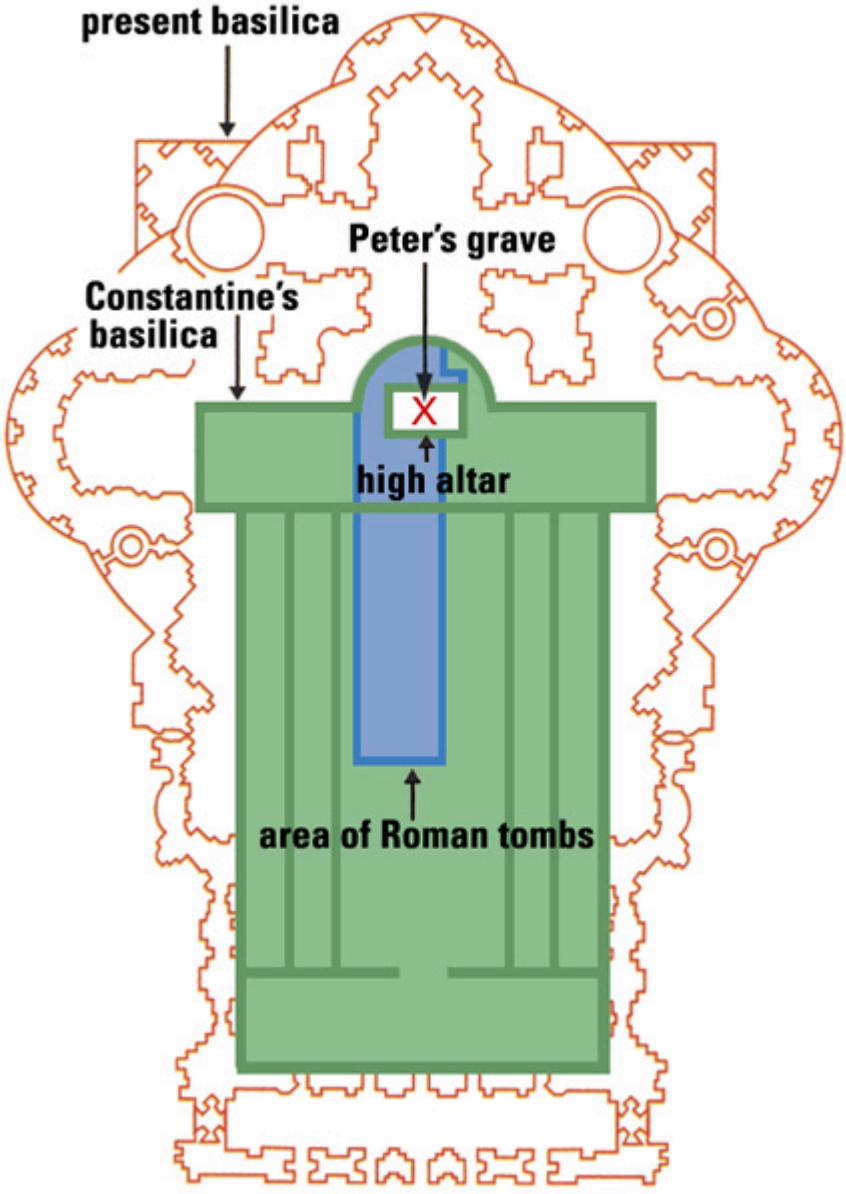
you and take you where you do not wish to go. (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he [Peter] would glorify God.)"

The tradition, familiar in Christian art, that Peter was crucified upside-down (see Caravaggio's painting on the cover of this issue), comes from a 231 C.E. work by the church father Origen: "And at last, having come to Rome, he was crucified head-downwards; for he had requested that he might suffer in this way."[7] Jerome in the fourth century adds Peter's reasons for his request: "At his hands he received the crown of martyrdom being nailed to the cross with his head towards the ground and his feet raised on high, asserting that he was unworthy to be crucified in the same manner as his Lord."[8]

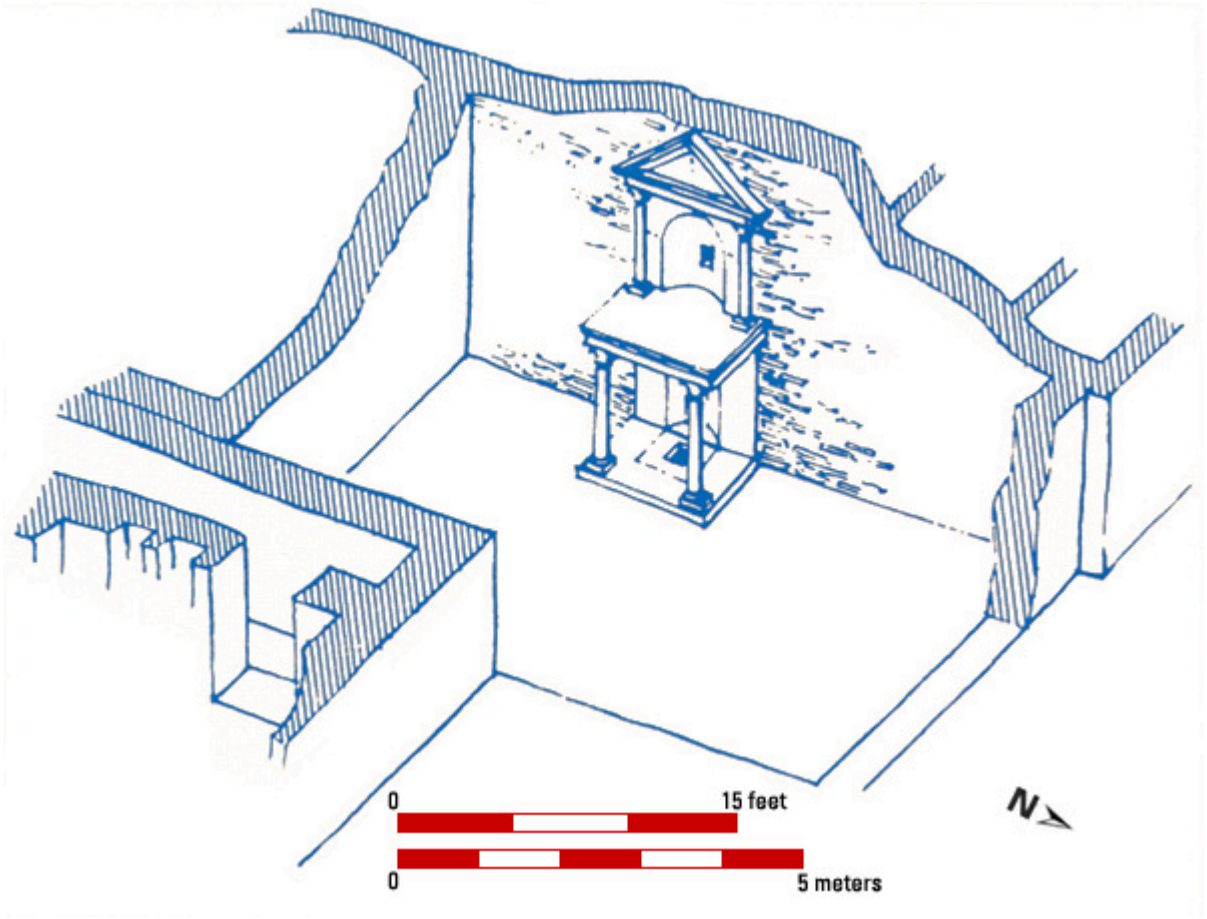
Later histories also agree that Peter was executed and/or buried at the Vatican, which in Roman times denoted an area extending westward from the Tiber River toward Mons Vaticanus, Vatican Hill. The first mention of a memorial to Peter at this site is the *tropaion* seen by Gaius in the late second century. In 349 C.E., Constantine built a church—the original St. Peter's—with its altar directly over the *tropaion*. Then in the 16th century, the architects Bramante and Michelangelo, at the request of Pope Julius II, designed a new domed basilica, over twice the size of Constantine's, that now stands on the same spot.

While we have no proof that the church marked Peter's tomb, archaeology has revealed that this area was a burial ground in Roman times, and that a shrine to Peter did indeed stand here as early as the second century C.E.[a]

In 1939, workmen digging a crypt for Pope Pius XI discovered the ancient necropolis (literally, "city of the dead") under the basilica.[9] The outbreak of World War II delayed excavations, but after the war an archaeological team under the direction of Monsignor Ludwig Kaas, and with the approval of Pope Pius XII, uncovered an ancient street, lined on both sides with tombs, running east-west under the central axis of the basilica (see plan). The tombs had frescoed walls, brick facades and porches designed to resemble miniature homes in the Roman style. Most were pagan, but some contained a mixture of pagan and Christian motifs.



At the west end of their excavations, directly below the high altar of the basilica, the excavators found a red plaster wall with a niche and pillared shrine (see drawing); these had been erected over a rectangular dirt grave. A graffiti inscription in the plaster of a nearby jutting wall contained the Greek words *PETROS*, "Peter," and *ENI*, which may be a contraction of *ENEOTI*, "is within." Manufacturers' marks in tiles lining a drainage ditch associated with the wall and surrounding courtyard dated the construction of the shrine to between 147 and 161 C.E. (during Caesar Marcus Aurelius's reign as co-emperor). This shrine could well be the original *tropaion* mentioned by Gaius.[b]




With the permission of Pius XII—in fact with the pontiff present—excavators recovered nearly 300 bones from the grave underneath the *tropaion*. The initial guarded excitement of the discovery eventually turned to disappointment, however, when in the late 1950s the bones were examined by a team of scientists and found to come from a mixture of individuals—two men probably in their fifties (too young to be Peter, who is believed to have been about 60 at death), a woman in her seventies, as well as some common domesticated animals. There was not a single bone of the 60-some-year-old man that excavators hoped to find.

But the story doesn't end there. Inside a forward-jutting wall just 2 feet from the earth grave was a stone-lined niche that had originally been covered over with stone and plaster. It was on this supplementary wall, originally built to stabilize the larger wall when it developed a crack, that the inscription *PETROS ENI* had been scratched. What the original excavators never knew was that their supervisor, Monsignor Kaas, who had died in 1952, had actually found a set of human bones in this concealed niche, along with traces of gold and purple-died cloth. Disapproving of the coldly scientific manner in which the excavators were treating—or, he felt, desecrating—the remains that they were finding in the surrounding necropolis, the cleric secretly had his foreman, Giovanni Segoni, remove these bones to a box for safekeeping. They sat forgotten for over a decade in a wooden box in a Vatican storeroom.

In 1963, an epigrapher studying the *tropaion*'s graffiti, Margherita Guarducci, learned of Kaas's secret find. She persuaded the new pope, Paul VI (a friend of her family's) to allow the bones to be studied. They turned out to come from a large man in his sixties—fitting the description of Peter. The dirt encrusting the bones chemically matched the dirt of the grave below the *tropaion*, meaning that they had originally been buried there but were moved at some point to this concealed niche in the wall above. The fabric was genuine royal purple stained with expensive dye from the Murex snail and had real gold thread. In June of 1968, Paul VI made an official announcement that St. Peter's relics had at last been found.

There is no way of knowing for sure if the bones are really St. Peter's, or even if St. Peter was really buried here. The most we can say archaeologically is that, in the second century, people were venerating this spot as the resting place of Peter, that Constantine later built a church to commemorate the site, and that at some point in its history the bones buried in the grave had been dug up and removed to a wall niche a few feet away from the grave. This could have happened either for protection from floods or from vandals, for instance during a period of anti-Christian persecution. If the bones are Peter's, the fact that the high altar of Constantine's (and the modern) church is situated directly over the grave itself and not the reliquary wall suggests either that Constantine himself did not know the bones had been removed to this wall niche or, as Guarducci surmised, they were moved—and hidden—when Constantine's church was built or some time after.